Professor Hannu Salmi and the Research Group of Design and Technology

On the Cultural History of Design and Technology
Case: Television

Kuva 1: Otsikkodia

<Tervehdys, itsen esittely>

...and I am representing the Research Group of Design and Technology in the Department of Cultural History here, at the University of Turku. Our research group consists of about ten (?) researchers, who are at different stages of their post-graduate studies. Also the topics and the methodologies employed among the group members are varied. However, in this (common) presentation we are going to introduce some ideas on the cultural history of design and technology, by discussing the television. We will analyse the *diversity* of socio-historical contexts of the television, but also discuss the television as a *technological* and as a *design* object.

Kuva 2: Contents.

The most important thing about the television is that it is a mass medium. Watching television is an essential part of the Western lifestyle. It is a medium in which governments and regulators have always been interested. The television set itself is both a *material* and a *symbolical* object; it is an object of consumption and an important item of household furnishing. TV production makes a global business. In addition, the TV set has throughout the decades been a platform for designing and marketing – what could be called as – "new technologies".

Some research traditions concerning *media* have focused on analysing for example the technological, political or, say, aesthetic aspects of the television. From a cultural historical perspective, these concepts cannot be treated separately, without taking the wider contexts into account. Our aim is to suggest a point of departure of a comprehensive analysis of the television culture.This requires also the involvement of other – perhaps not yet largely utilised – tools of analysis and concepts; such as the notions of material culture, the user-oriented approach to technology, and the history of every-day life.

A key element in the set of Cultural History research principles is the *holistic* perspective on the research dilemma. If we take technology as an example, a cultural historical view of it acknowledges the importance of a *social* and *historical context* shaping the diffusion, the usage practices, the overall image and the ways in which people talk about a specific technological appliance.

Although television *technology* – that is, the set of mechanical devices that are put together in order to produce specific operations – materialises in the processes of collaboration between engineers, designers, manufacturers, consumers' interests groups etc, technology cannot, however, be solely demarcated as technical devices. Already in the planning process of an innovation there are several social and contextual negotiations taking place. It is clear that even the *idea* of a technological device has to pass a so-called social acceptance limit in order to be processed further.

The Television and the Radio in the 1950s Finland

But before really going into the conceptual part, we will provide you with some glimpses at the history of television in Finland. Our empirical examples are based on the archive material of two major television manufacturers in Finland; Asa-Radio (nowadays Turku TV Operations Ltd) and Salora, both of which started the television set production in the late 1950s. By the 1970s both of these companies had grown into important manufacturers focusing on bringing their technologically innovative products to the market. In fact, Salora was the largest television manufacturer in Scandinavia and a notable exporter of television sets throughout the world.

When television, (näköradio), "the radio with pictures", was introduced into homes, people were already familiar with the radio and broadcasting. In Europe, the principles of state controlled public service were formed for the radio, and through them the educational, informative and entertaining contents of radio programmes were regulated. Television naturally became a part of this idealistic ideology. At least in Finland, however, the public took up a different attitude to the TV compared to that of the radio. The radio had mostly been a serious medium for education, while as the television with its two state-owned broadcast channels became a medium for entertainment. Foreign – largely American – movies, serials and TV series constituted a large part of its output.

The interaction between the two media was wide-ranging already from the start. In the 1950s the TV programme coordinators needed attractive and well-known personalities to appear on TV, and the solution was to hire them from the radio. And not only personnel, but also certain programme types and genres first introduced on the radio were transformed into TV programmes. For example quiz shows, domestic comedy series, detective stories and serials were a regular part of radio airings and later on almost a bulk of the television programming. The television and radio personnel worked in intense collaboration and the programming coordinates resulted largely from the same aesthetic thinking.

This seems natural for a number of reasons. If we look at the ownership of these different media forms, between the 1950s and 1980s, we see that in Finland, as well as in many other European countries, the TV and radio channels were state-owned and controlled. Therefore, the same programming policy was in use in both media. The television benefited from the status of the radio in its domestication process – it came as to fill the place of the radio receiver in homes with new, advanced and more "modern" technology.

So, it is not surprising that also the designing and manufacturing of both devices were closely linked in practice. Many of the television manufacturing companies in the late 1950s had started their businesses as radio manufacturers, amongst these were Asa-Radio and Salora. For example the visual appearance of the early – what could be called as the – "table-type" television set was quite directly taken from the contemporary radio receivers.

Kuva 3: Salora Riviera 1956
Kuva 4. Salora TV (1957)

It did not last long, however, that the television and the radio were thought of as fundamentally – perhaps – similar devices. By the late 1950s it was apparent that television was stealing the status of the radio. Although the transistor technology and the rise of popular music made the radio attractive again to the audience in the 1960s, it was evident that the robust TV set had taken a central place in people's homes. The radio had to develop a new strategy, which was then to be accentuated in advertisements: the portable radio device would be a perfect companion on a drive or on a cottage holiday.

Some Glimpses on the History of the Television Set Design in Finland

The professional niche of industrial designers within the wider field of art and design started gradually to take shape about at the same time as the television manufacturing did in Finland. However, the co-operation between designers and the television industry was not self-evident in those early years. Notwithstanding some exceptions, like Tapio Wirkkala and Reino Ruokolainen in the late 1950s, it was only at the turn of the 1970s that the television manufacturers started to use industrial designers as members of their product development team. It seems that the decision making concerning the appearance of the new TV set models was carried out by the company's managers, who were responsible for the marketing of new products.

It is possible to outline three types of TV models produced by the Finnish television manufacturers between the late 1950s and the early 1970s: 1) one with legs, 2) another with doors and 3) the already mentioned table-type. If the early table-models looked like radio sets, then a television set with doors and legs would resemble a small sideboard in the middle of other pieces of furniture in the home interior.

Why was the form of the television set taken from other pieces of furniture? It has been said that the design of the early mass-market television sets had to be relatively conservative, because the sets were targeted to the middle-class audience, the taste preferences of whom were rather undemonstrative. In addition to that it is possible to suggest (with the support of other sources, e.g. oral testimonies) that the television sets with doors in fact represented the contemptuous attitudes of the educated class towards the new medium. For these people, the television was something they both *wanted* to have and did *not* want to have at the same time. The doors granted them a way to hide this ambivalent artefact away from their own, and their guests' eyes. The television with doors can also be interpreted as a representation of the need to control watching – particularly as in some models the doors could be locked!

Kuva 5: Asa-Futura (1969).

In the 1960s, there is one curious example of very different attitude towards the television. This TV set was an up-to-date design object of its time, and a truly exceptional case in comparison to the other models of that period of time. This Asa-Radio's model nr 2660, the so-called Asa-Futura, was released in 1969. In spite of the clear references to "object field" of "high design", and for the positive reception the Asa-Futura set gained in the design circles, it is worth mentioning – as it is not commonly known – that Asa-Futura was designed by Samuli Saura, the company's product manager, whose (educational) background was, in fact, in engineering. He has remembered having been inspired by Eero Aarnio's famous glassfibre chairs, which had claimed success for the Finnish furniture industry on the international design forum along the 1960s. <And this can also be seen in the following picture...>

Kuva 6: Eero Aarnio's chair used in Asa-Radio's marketing catalogue just a year before Asa-Futura was launched.

The Transformation of the Television Set

In a sense Asa-Futura could be seen as a symbol for the change that gradually took place in the television discourses. Later on, during the 1970s and 1980s, the discourse stressing the *technological* details of the television sets seems to have increased considerably in the marketing material. In the beginning of the 1970s, TV set ads still emphasized their fundamental character as pieces of furniture. In 1987, this setting had already changed: a much stronger *hi-tech* association had been attached with the television. The materials, of which TV sets were made, were proudly described as outcomes of technological processes rather than seen as of organic origin.

Part of the changes in the post-1970s Finnish television industry was that manufacturers started to co-operate more closely with designers. For example, in 1973 the industrial designer Heikki Kiiski was employed as a full time designer at Salora. The particular examples of the 1980s TV set design with high designer profile show clear indications of the hi-tech oriented thinking: here are Finlux television (1984) and Sky Design (1987), designed by Tapani Hyvönen for Lohja Oy:n Finlux Kulutuselektroniikka.

Kuva 7: Hyvösen mallit.

Similar traits can also be seen in mass-produced TV sets from all over the world. So, from the 1980s onwards, television sets started to have plastic covers rather than wooden, as before. The emphasis on high technology can also be linked with the promotion campaign for the *new image* of especially one Finnish TV manufacturer, Salora.

Kuva 8: Saloran 1983 brosyyristä (ruskea ja hopea malli, avaruusasema)

In 1983, Salora TV sets were divided into five categories: top models, standard models, basic models, multipurpose models, and TV sets with teletext. In advertising, differences between categories were strengthened by choosing specific images to represent the model. In a picture of the top model, one could see the meeting of *Apollo* and *Sojuz* spaceships. The top model had also certain "technological elegance": in addition to a wide-raging tuner and an automatic channel search system it included "100 pre-programmed channels and 32 storage locations". No wonder that the 1983 brochure stated that the qualities of the Salora top model were to be sufficient even for the "demands of the future".

The prices of the colour TV's had reached the peak in the 1970s. In the 1980s consumers had to be tempted to buy new TV sets with additional services. This is the main reason why many companies started to develop hi-tech televisions. The other reason is that the importance of microprocessors in electronics industry grew steadily in the 1970s. The use of digital technology made it possible for the already existing technological qualities – as well as the additional features – become more and more sophisticated. To name just a few, the important new features of the time were the remote control, TV games and digital tuning.

There are also other examples of how the hi-tech image of television was constructed. The Videotex projects, which started in Europe in the late 1970s, were the first attempt to make a fusion between information networks and the television.

Kuva 9: TELSET

With an interactive Videotex TV set it was possible to download software, play games, read magazines etc. It is interesting to notice that Videotex was marketed in quite the same way as the MHP (Multimedia Home Platform) television is being marketed today.

The Finnish company Salora also wanted to participate in the Videotex project and it started to manufacture Videotex TV sets. They were designed so that they could be used in households as "communication centres". The problem was that the Videotex systems were technically too slow and too expensive for the public. Almost all of the interactive Videotex projects were commercial failures.

Kuva 10: Salora Teletext

Only less demanding systems of interaction survived, the best example of this being the teletext, which was paralleled with a newspaper. It provided the viewer with continuously renewing information, messaging and other online services. In Finland, the Finnish Broadcasting Company, YLE, started the teletext service in 1981, and in the same year Salora began manufacturing the teletext TV sets.

In the late 1970s and 1980s the television was seen as the most important medium, and new products like video recorders, microcomputers, and games were seen as by-products of television.

Kuva 11: Saloran kuva, jossa tv on linkki muiden laitteiden keskellä

In the 1983 Salora catalogue this feature is underlined in the cover photo, showing a television set that operates and "communicates" with a video recorder. Thus, it described those ways of usage that were expected to change the nature of watching the TV. In general, the television's connections to the outer world were regarded more active as before. The television was no longer a piece of consumer electronics only, but it was a knot in the communication network and could be linked to a satellite and a cable as well as with a video recorder and a computer.

Television as a medium for Cultural History

Coming to the cultural historical research on design and technology, it is notable that it is *not* solely concentrating on the discourses and mentalities that have a more or less vague connection to concrete apparati. Concepts like discourse and mentality are thus not only connected to the imaginary or the textual, but also to the material and the technological. So, in short, the technologies that we use in the concrete world are material entities with certain compositions, functions and potentials – the effects of which cannot be regarded solely as socially constructed.

In this regard technologies are not just textual meanings, but also material objects and practices of every-day life that shape the concrete human world. For example, the "television" is not just about meanings transmitted through the air or via cable, but it is about physical conditions, technical components, arrangements, watching practices and positions. Such habitual stages of *domesticating* process of technology, as where the TV set is *situated*, how are the viewers supposed to *position* themselves, the *size* of the TV screen, how does the TV *activate* the senses etc., are all crucially important aspects when considering the cultural and historical position of the television. As we mentioned earlier in the presentation, such material aspects – as if a TV set has got doors or not – should be acknowledged in the research process.

One of the main points, in cultural historical reseach of television, is to understand the *interlinkedness* and the *reciprocal* nature of these large themes of study. These are all affecting each other to the extent that one could not exist without the others. *Politics* (self-evidently) refers to the political decision-making practices that straightforwardly influence the circumstances in which television sets are manufactured and retailed. But it also affects indirectly, through licence fees, broadcasting and advertising regulations, TV programming guidelines and for example the ideology behind public service.

If we look at the recent discussions about the digital television, it is evident that the technologically and politically sound innovation cannot survive without one, in this case the *aesthetic*, dimension that is missing from the scene. The audience has not had the chance to explicate its interests, nor has it accepted the technical device. It is quite evident that large audiences are not primarily interested in the technological aspects of television sets or functions, but are keen on television programmes and some useful services. Aesthetic, here, as a term, does not uniquely refer to pleasurable stimuli on the brain by the senses, but from an academic perspective it also covers the textual analysis of television programmes. Therefore it can be appointed as a useful research term, for example, in reception studies.

In this respect the interesting question lies on how technological devices are tried to be made acceptable and desirable to the public. As has been described earlier, in 1983, the Salora models were categorised according to their supposed user. Everybody was not expected to pay for the top model. Four years later this strategy had been changed. Now, the manufacturer aimed to apply high technology to every model. They seem to have thought that even the more modest TV set types would sell better if they labeled them with hi-tech jargon. In 1989, the products of Salora were all presented as products of hi-tech, as products that employed progressive and innovative technological solutions.

Kuva 12: Saloran esite (1989).

When technological qualities were at stake, the Finnish adds and brochures often used English words in order to stress the nature of technology as something extraordinary, perhaps thus referring to the idea that English is more the language of technological progress than Finnish. So, the Salora catalogue offered English expressions in abundance: the new TV sets had a *High Focus* picture tube, an automatic control system called *DigiComputer* and an *AES* regulation system. The video recorders, on their behalf, included a picture improvement technology called *High Quality* and a *One Touch Recording* possibility.
Within a decade, the Salora TV may still have been an interesting piece of furniture but it was foremost a hi-tech product that would open new connections to the changing media world at the

end of the millennium. In other words the "hi-tech image" of the TV set can also be seen as a result of general technical advancement in consumer electronics. One could also say that the concept of digital television was already taking shape in the early 1980s.

However, one cannot get a full grasp of the meaning of these technological changes by concentrating solely on the conditions of the production and publicity. In addition to these we need to analyse *audiences* as well. The study of audiences is obviously not new. Quantitative, psychological, and recently even historical studies on audiences have been done in the academic field of media studies. But to get a fuller understanding of the historical and material conditions of watching TV, it might be fruitful to start thinking about the concept of a *user*, which is developed quite recently in the field of technology studies.

The television audience has not often been regarded as mere *passive* recipients, but research interests have been targeted to the various forms of *active* use of the TV. These discussions have benefited from the work done in studies on other technological devices. In the age of digital television, these tendencies are likely to strengthen, as the new programme types and many on-line services *require* a certain level of interaction.

The introduction of the television was not only cheered, but also met with anxiety among the public in the 1950s Finland: many people were reluctant to accept the arrival of the new medium into their homes. Would it be worthwhile to look at these people, who consciously refused to watch TV? In more general terms, do non-users have influence on the development of technology and if so, what kind of effect do they have?

The resistance can be understood as an active or passive opposition towards the institutions, specific programs or the technology itself. Why have some religious sects objected to the television so effervescently? One way of putting the question would be: What is it that these people actually objected to or refused to accept? In order to understand the complexities of the television culture, we have to look for the wide context that goes beyond the institutions of television. Answering seems to require taking into consideration the *cost* of the television set, its *situation* in the household furnishing, the *time* spent on watching TV, the *social life* of a potential TV viewer, other media and the taste differences, etc. etc.

It was explained earlier on, how the early steps of the television culture related to the habits of listening to the radio. Analysing the listening, viewing and using practices of a technical device are a key part of the cultural historical research of technology. If the aim of research was to understand the changes in everyday life, areas of focus could be, for example, leisure time, consumer culture, social or family relations, or the gender system.

A New Era: The Triumph of the Finnish Television Technology and Design

Kuva 13: Marimekko Television.

Earlier this summer, in June, Turku TV Operations Ltd released a product that is being advertised as a completely new kind of television set, Marimekko Television. This artefact combines two topical phenomena on the scenes of Finnish design and technology: the retro style of the 1960s and 1970s Marimekko fabrics, especially that of the Unikko pattern, and digital television. No surprise, Marimekko TV has gained remarkable publicity.

Kuva 14: Paakkanen, Laine

According to the manufacturer's press-release (www), putting together two – which seem to be from a Finnish perspective – essentially *Finnish* areas of knowledge and expertice, those of *high-tech and design*, the manufacturers expect the Marimekko television to be a potential success story among the Finnish products for export. In advertising they also state that "the role of

television in interior decoration is becoming more prominent", and that "a Marimekko television provides a new kind of component for the interior design." Furthermore,

> "different kinds of patterns can now be used to alter the feel of a home as required. Television will become a visible part of the interior design, be it the living room, children's room or even the summer cottage. There are three different Marimekko Designs to choose from, besides classical black and white. In the future, further models can be added to compliment the current trends."

They obviously want to provide their clients with a tool, with which to actively design and possibly later re-design home interiors.

Another viewpoint to Marimekko TV: one of the rare design critics in this country, Kaj Kalin, wrote in a home decoration magazine *Glorian Koti*: Marimekko TV is a true "design *faux pas*", meaning a design flaw. He stated that Marimekko TV is essentially not a design object, but it represents (what he calls) "styling" purely for the purposes of the business world.

Kuva 15: Unikko-pilakuva.

<Here we can see an artist's idea of how the introduction of a "new kind of TV" – the Unikko TV changes the television culture; unikko meaning "poppy" (in the Finnish language the word "unikko" itself has got a connotation to sleep). Well, the set is a novelty, but the TV programmes are the same as ever…>

Therefore, the question remains: is the role of the television in culture changing radically, as it would seem from a technological and a design perspective?

In this presentation we have argued that technology is constructed in the human world, according to human values. Technology is thus *predetermined* by the discourses and practices of human social contexts. The people designing, producing and using technologies are people with certain specific cultural habits, experiences, values and prejudices, and these are sure to inscribe their influence on the machines and devices used.

Social contexts and mentalities are likely to stay similar for a long period of time. If we accept that technology is predetermined by the discourses and practices of people, we could say that the role of the television set is not rapidly changing at all.

At the same time we cannot deny the fact that the TV set *is* changing from a technological and a design perspective. On this ground, we must face it that since the material conditions of watching TV and having the TV set as part of your home decoration have altered, the television culture is cannot forever stay the same.

Kuva 16. THANK YOU!

Kuva 17 ja 18. Esittelyt